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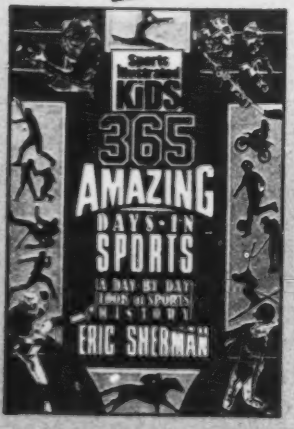

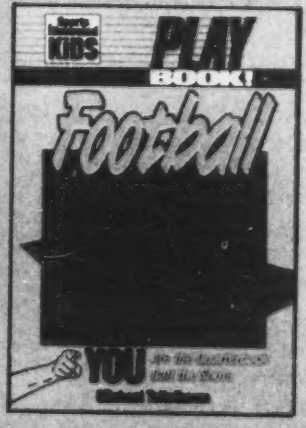

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Floor Displays: Not Just Dumps Anymore

Considered ugly space-hogs by some booksellers, floor displays remain an inexpensive, effective merchandising tool

BY RICHARD H. BROWN

Despite increasing bookseller investment in artfully designed built-in and freestanding permanent display fixtures (*PW*, July 21, 1989), despite fierce competition among publishers for floor space in the stores, and despite the reluctance—on aesthetic grounds—of some retailers to use them, the corrugated display business appears to be flourishing.

Such are the results of surveys of display manufacturers, a survey of booksellers done by Cahners Publishing's Market Research Department (see boxes, pp. 39, 40) and an informal sampling of booksellers.

Among specific findings:

- The complicated displays of the past are now used for only a handful of titles a year.
- Dumps, once used mainly for mass market titles, are a widely accepted aid to selling certain trade paperback and hardcover books.
- Booksellers—even ones who don't like their looks—find that corrugated displays sell books and are cost-effective.
- Mass market publishers produced some one million displays last year.

Rise of the Dump

Corrugated "book dumps" first appeared in the 1950s as a convenient means of shipping mass market paperbacks. The prepacked tray, when sent with an easy-to-assemble corrugated base, could be quickly converted by booksellers into a display stand. Using prepacks assured the publisher of selling a fixed quantity of books (usually more than the bookseller had planned to buy), while the retailer benefited by ending up with an easy-to-assemble display unit.

It wasn't long before all mass market publishers were offering prepacked displays each month for their lead titles. As each house tried to outdo the other, the industry went through a period of sensational displays featuring life-sized, die-cut figures in full color (a few of which were geared to talk), double- and even triple-layered headers, floral scents—even motors to make parts of the display move.

These displays got attention, but they were enormously expensive to produce, and they were often too large to fit in the available floor space.

In recent years, most of the mass market houses have either given up on the "full-blown specials" completely or have cut them back to just a few a year. They are now commonly used only for the blockbuster book or for special promotions.

Wanted: Small but Catchy Dumps

A bookstore survey conducted last year for *PW* by the Cahners Research Department showed that 64.4% of the respondents indicated that they use freestanding in-store displays. They cite two simple reasons for this: the displays help sell books and are cost effective.

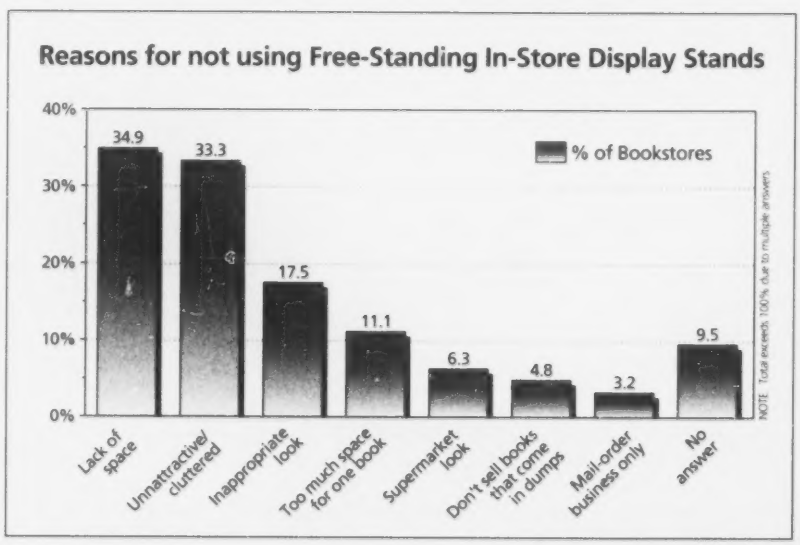
Some 35.6% of the responding stores declared that they did not use corrugated displays. The two chief reasons: lack of space and a judgment that book dumps were generally unattractive.

PW recently interviewed several booksellers to expand on these findings and explore their implications. Among the booksellers who were bullish about the corrugated floor display was Bruce Dasse, divisional merchandise manager of Waldenbooks, who said, "It's by far the best vehicle for selling mass paperbacks, especially in the initial period."

Other bullish booksellers included both Rupert LeCraw, owner of Oxford Books, Atlanta, Ga., and Jim Troxler, owner of the Village Book Store, Tupelo, Miss. LeCraw commented: "A dump definitely helps a book with besteller potential get off the ground." Troxler was even more emphatic, saying, "We use them all the time. A stand will sell a book. You can't do nearly as well off the shelf. Of course, the title's potential better warrant the kind of quantity you have to buy to get the stand."

The chief complaint of the booksellers with whom *PW* spoke had to do with the cluttered look they said the dumps gave their stores. Joe Gable, manager of the Border's Book Shop, Ann Arbor, Mich., minced no words: "We don't use them because they look like junk." In this environmentally conscious age, there are also concerns about impact of excess cardboard.

Dan Odegard, owner of Odegard Books of Minneapolis, was both kinder and more ambivalent in his



Brown is president of Practical Book Displays and former advertising sales director of PW.

assessment: "They seem to work, but nobody really likes them because they're ugly and demean the basic architecture of the store. We tend to use them out of necessity—because they're effective."

Such aesthetic and environmental concerns were echoed by booksellers who have installed permanent display fixtures that can be made to serve many of the same purposes of the corrugated stands and that fit in more pleasingly with the decor of the store.

Bill Rickman, president of Kroch's & Brentano's, Chicago, was one of those whose stores, 19 in all, are "fixtured the way we want to show books," but who still uses corrugated dumps, albeit "very selectively." He stressed, however, that the store would never use more than one or two at a time within a department and that "we police them and take them down as soon as they've served their purpose."

For all his enthusiasm for the corrugated dump as a selling tool, LeCraw of Oxford is among those booksellers who have added permanent display fixtures that have led to less use of publisher-provided stands. "We're not taking them on the way we did in the old days when all we had were shelves," he said. "But we still use four to six a month."

The general consensus is that publisher-provided special displays are considered more attractive than standard dumps. However, these cost three to four times as much to produce. With that sort of investment, the number of books that must go with them represents a considerably greater investment for both bookseller and publisher.

Limited bookstore space creates great competition among publishers. One publisher complained that "you knock yourself out to be creative and then everybody's doing it. The stores demand that you be spectacular, but then they also want you to be compact. So you go back and try to be different yet again, but there's just so much innovation you can come up with. That's why we've given up on specials and are going solely with generic stands."

Except for minor refinements, generic corrugated displays—or display formats applicable to any title—remain virtually unchanged from the days of early rock 'n' roll and Hula Hoops. Often a generic tray and base are combined with a specially produced header designed for a specific title.

Bookstores Use of Free-standing In-store Displays

Use	64.4%
Don't use	35.6%
Total respondents	177

Millions of Dumps

It is estimated that all the major mass market paperback houses together produce approximately one million such floor display units annually (with perhaps another couple of hundred thousand counter displays among them). Though there are small differences from house to house, the general configurations include a base bearing the publisher's logo and a tray divided into six, eight, nine or 12 pockets that present books face outward. Nine pockets are most common.

Pocket depths vary widely, from as shallow as 2½ inches to as deep as 6¾ inches. A publisher may stock trays with as many as four additional intermediate depths to account for the differences in bulk among titles as well as the number of copies to be featured. Most trays carry 36 copies, though some hold as few as 18, or as many as 54.

Among the virtues of the generic floor stand for a publisher is the fact that it can be ordered from the manufacturer in quantity at a favorable price and inventoried for use as needed. Stocking quantities range from 5000 or less to as many as 60,000.

Stands are distributed in accordance with the market's response to a publisher's output from month to month. Frequently they are offered, but find no takers. Sometimes they go out in quantities as low as several hundred for regional coverage only; other times, at 5000 or more. About 2000 is average for a typical mass market title at most houses.

Joy of Stacks

What was at first primarily a phenomenon of mass market paperbacks has now become a standard tool of trade publishing as well. Today, corrugated displays merchandise illustrated trade paperbacks with "impulse" appeal, hardcover books selling in mass market numbers and children's and YA series.

As far back as the 1950s, corrugated displays were used in the launching of major new cookbooks and dictionaries. In the 1970s, mass market IDs took on trade paper editions like the *Joy of Sex* and original Avon romances in floor dumps. Trade paperbacks in many categories (from cartoon books to restaurant guides, from licensed character tie-ins to inspirational titles and pop poetry) began appearing in counter displays next to bookseller cash registers and in floor stands as well.

During the 1980s, there were the unprecedented million-copy sales of hardcover books, many of them published by mass market houses and involving dumps. By the end of the decade, corrugated displays for major hardcover titles were common.

Also in the 1980s, the dramatic growth in retail sales of children's books brought with it the kind of aggressive merchandising represented by the corrugated display unit. Dumps were apt to find a home in the expanded footage devoted to children's books.

Because of the great variety of trim sizes and book bulks, trade hardcover and paperbacks and children's book displays are usually "special"—designed specifically for a title. But two- and four-pocket generic floor displays for a few hardcover trim sizes are not uncommon.

With so many publishers now involved in what had once been the sole province of the mass market paperback, it is extremely difficult to calculate the total number of corrugated units now being brought to the marketplace. It is clear, however, that there is still widespread agreement among publishers of all kinds that floor displays are the most efficient way to ship and show a book to potential buyers.

Few disagree that in many instances book dumps produce far better results than advertising. As one publisher put it: "There just aren't enough dollars available to support a book nationally. With any kind of decent distribution on a display, at least a book has a chance."

That is the attitude that seems to prevail more often than not among retailers as well. Ugly duckling though it may be in the eyes of some, the old-fashioned corrugated display can still justify its place in the aisles of America's bookstores (the majority of them, at any rate).

Publishers Weekly *wishes to thank Practical Displays Marketing Inc., for permitting the author to use information gathered in the course of a market research project.* □